Propaganda Analysis
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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Mar., 1938), pp. 217-221
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/806063
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PROPAGANDA ANALYSIS

HADLEY CANTRIL[1]

INTRODUCTION

So far, in the twentieth century, propagandists have sold us everything from toothpaste to war. Never before has the world seen so many propagandas competing for the attention of the bewildered laymen. One of the chief reasons for this tremendous barrage is the vast development that has taken place in the mediums of communication. Newspapers, the radio, and the movies—all are vehicles of propaganda, and two of them in our own culture, the newspaper and the radio, depend for their very existence upon one form of propaganda which we call advertising.

The history of propaganda is old. It is an ancient art, and its technique can be found in the orations of Demosthenes against the Macedonians. The early Christian missionaries were propagandists, and we find as early as 1633 Pope Gregory XV establishing a Catholic propaganda institute. But propaganda on a wholesale basis was first used during the World War. We remember the famous "paper bullets" which some claim were as important during the last few months of the war as were lead bullets.

What is this thing called "propaganda"? It is difficult to define since it includes so much. Our definition will be that propaganda is expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends. This definition implies several things. First, that propaganda is a positive thing, that it is well planned, that it is selfish, that it is noncritical, making use of suggestion and not reason, and, finally, that it may be good or bad, depending upon the social point of view of the individual judging it.

[1] Dr. Cantril is associate professor of psychology at Princeton University and president of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.

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TECHNIQUES OF PROPAGANDISTS

How does the propagandist go about his task? There are certain simple rules and principles of propaganda that the psychologist sees, although the majority of propagandists are probably unaware of the principles they use, but they find their methods work, and they are extremely clever in utilizing certain basic psychological principles.

The first of these propaganda principles is to connect the idea or object you are propagandizing with some attitude, symbol, or emotion that people already know and feel strongly about. The propagandist must, then, know people. Herr Goebbels has one rule of propaganda, which is to see with the eyes of the masses. Propagandists must use symbols that are rich in their emotional meaning, symbols that appeal to broad, general attitudes or sentiments which are so vague that people may be for or against them emotionally and yet not know precisely what such symbols mean. Take, for example, the often repeated symbols of justice, beauty, liberty, economy, patriotism. To these and other such attitudes, we find the propagandist connecting soaps, cigarettes, political campaigns, and appeals to join the army. Vague emotionally toned words such as "communist," "Red," "Moscow," "atheist," "slacker," etc., are used to arouse us against individuals whom the propagandist labels uncritically. These vague words that most people dislike, they also do not clearly understand. This simple rule of propaganda is so frequently used that the layman is by now more or less aware of the propagandist's trick. Hence the propagandist must resort to his second principle in order to conceal his purpose or to make it socially acceptable.

The second principle is to build up a new attitude around your product or idea by using subtle, concealed suggestion. In using this technique, the propagandist frequently tries to get his propaganda into newspapers as news or as editorial opinion. In this he is highly successful, and a large proportion of the news in even the best newspapers of the country may be seen as propaganda by the student acquainted with the techniques and aims of the various interest groups now trying to influence public opinion.

Another method for building up the public attitudes regarding someone's pet idea is to disguise propaganda as explanation. This is

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a device frequently employed by those already in power. Here we find, as perhaps the most glaring example, the efforts of the public utilities to enlist the co-operation of educators so that the educators will teach, without knowing it, the things that would preserve the interests of those who now control utilities. Textbook writers are influenced, college professors are hired to write and speak for the interests, technical journals are used to "explain" or rationalize the selfish interests of those behind the scenes. Another example of such "explanation" is the propaganda of the New Deal in its early days.

Since the use of this particular method is so dependent upon the situation in question and the tenor of the times, great companies and powerful individuals now hire experts in propaganda who call themselves public relations counsels, and whose business it is to feel the public's pulse in all classes and vocations and find out where the people are most gullible. The public relations counsel, then, once hired, will work for his client through the newspapers, through the radio, through medical journals, through high-school textbooks, and through cutouts for the kiddies.

WHY IS THE PROPAGANDIST SO SUCCESSFUL?

So much for the techniques of the propagandist. Why is he so successful? There are three chief reasons for this. First, the great majority of the words in our language, or any other language, are freighted with emotion. Most of the time we do not react to the dictionary meaning of the word, but to a whole complex of feeling that surrounds that word. Take, for example, the word "strawberry." We know what a strawberry is, but we always think it is a "good" thing. The word "love" can hardly be mentioned without arousing a whole host of sentiments in every individual. The word "Turk" will arouse in most Americans an unfavorable attitude even though most of these same Americans have never known a Turk. We learn the attitude toward words, or society's value of words, at the same time we learn their meaning.

A second reason why the propagandist is so successful is because most of us are unsure of ourselves. We seek a meaning for those things we do not understand. We do not want to appear ignorant on too many questions, and so we accept the judgment of some au-

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thority, of some official, of some newspaper editor, of some columnist, or some radio commentator. We feel that he must know more about the issue than we do, as he probably does, but we forget at the same time that the opinions of such experts are frequently elaborated rationalizations of their own point of view, but rationalizations which seem to us as objective, critical analyses of the issues. As life becomes more and more specialized, we are depending more and more upon other people for our judgments. The propagandist, then, gives us his meaning, to satisfy our desire for a solution to problems such as what shall I buy, how shall I vote, what shall I believe.

A third reason for his success is that most of us are anxious to preserve our own position in life, to maintain our status, or to enhance our status, and we have, therefore, a tendency to accept that type of propaganda that makes us feel superior to other individuals or makes us feel that our own status is better than the other fellow's. One race will believe it is superior to another race. The rich will think the poor are happy or irresponsible because rationalizing their status to themselves will make them feel less remorseful when they think of the plight of those with fewer opportunities. We accept the political philosophy that best suits our interests, and it is a pessimistic outlook to find that intelligence has so little to do with the way we vote, for each political party has in it about the same proportion of smart people and stupid people. Smart people differ mainly in the elaborateness with which they can rationalize their status.

HOW CAN WE MAKE OURSELVES LESS SUSCEPTIBLE TO PROPAGANDA?

There are two chief methods. First, to understand the technique of the propagandist and the aims and goals he has in mind. Second, to understand our own biases, the forces in the environment that have given us our particular status and our particular opinions and that have tended to make us reject other opinions which do not serve our own selfish interests. This means, essentially, that education is propaganda's most deadly enemy and is the reason why the propagandists themselves are frightened when they see people being educated in the methods that the propagandists use, for education is critical, not one-sided. It appeals to reason more than to emotion,

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and it seeks truth rather than trying to achieve some special selfish interest.

The aim of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis is to help the educator and the layman detect propaganda so that he will be more intelligent in choosing the variety of propaganda he will follow and in reaching his own decisions. Remember, "It's fun to be fooled but it's more fun to know."

READING FOR MEANING

PAUL A. WITTY[1]

During the past decade a renewed and intensified interest in the teaching of reading has been reflected in varied and extensive research projects, in the numerous conferences concerned with the problem of reading failure, and in the somewhat general realization that reading instruction fails to produce young people and adults who read extensively. Moreover, with increasing frequency, one finds citation of the meager skills of typical junior and senior high school pupils. And, similarly, the reading of typical college students reveals a paucity in amount and type. From whatever school level we choose, research results confirm the general observation that elementary- and secondary-school pupils have not developed effective reading skills and habits, and that impossible reading demands are made upon hordes of children whose habits of work and general mental hygiene become increasingly impaired as they are forced to adapt themselves to learning (in effect, memorizing) more and more unintelligible and meaningless materials.[2]

Moreover, studies of the leisure activities and preferences of adults reveal the low estate occupied by reading. For example, in a study made by the writer of the reading habits of five hundred adults,

[1] Dr. Witty is director of the psycho-educational clinic at Northwestern University. This address was delivered before the National Council of Teachers of English, general session, at Buffalo, November 28, 1937.

[2] Significant studies have been reported by Donald Durrell, Marion Monroe, W. S. Gray, A. I. Gates, E. A. Betts, and Stella Center. All investigators stress the high frequency of "preventable" or "remediable" reading retardation in elementary- and secondary-school children.

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